

A critical review of design history: From the individual artist to the social agent¹

Uma revisão crítica da história do design: do artista individual ao agente social

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Abstract

Our vision of the future depends on the one we have about the past. In this paper, the prevailing stances in the study of design history are analysed to clarify their influence on the shaping of our concept about design: what it is and could be. The traditional thread in the study of design history has its roots in Pevsner's work, who purports a vision of design as heir to the architectural tradition, and in Geidion's texts, that emphasize the notion of technological evolution. As a result, the vision of design that is taught (therefore directing most of our professional practice) favours the notion of this profession as "art" and the figure of individual designers as cultural heroes, leaving out other postures that could be more akin to our needs and possibilities. Therefore a critical reflection about design history is fundamental in order to imagine different futures and other models of professional practice. From this analysis, the proposal to explore other perspectives than those of the dominant approaches emerges, in order to stimulate the required reflection that could help formulate innovative scenarios and thus shape future products and services.

Keywords: Design history, Art history, Design education.

Resumo

Nossa visão de futuro depende da visão que temos sobre o passado. Neste trabalho, as posições dominantes no estudo da história do design são analisadas para esclarecer a sua influência sobre a formação do nosso conceito sobre o design: o que é e pode ser. A linha tradicional no estudo da história do design tem suas raízes na obra de Pevsner que propõe uma visão do design como herdeiro da tradição arquitetônica, e nos textos de Geidion, que enfatizam a noção de evolução tecnológica. Como resultado, a visão do design que é ensinado (portanto, direciona a maior parte de nossa prática profissional) favorece a noção da profissão como "arte" e a figura de criadores individuais como heróis culturais, deixando de fora outras posturas que poderiam ser mais parecidas com nossas necessidades e possibilidades. Portanto, uma reflexão crítica sobre a história do design é fundamental, a fim de imaginar futuros diferentes e outros modelos de prática profissional. A partir desta análise, surge a proposta de explorar outras perspectivas do que os das abordagens dominantes, a fim de estimular a reflexão necessária que poderia ajudar a formular cenários inovadores e assim moldar futuros produtos e serviços.

Palavras-chave: História do design, História da arte, Educação de design.

Introduction

Design history plays an important role in the construction of discourses that help professional bodies and society in general analyse and understand the issues that affect the design processes and their results in terms of designed objects. Due to the crisis of the Modern Movement and the changing social role of design, we are passing through a phase of radical adjustments.

History as a discipline faces its own problems due to the diversity of approaches to specific histories like

women's, micro history, economical thinking, technological developments or the human body itself (Burke, 1994). The historical study of design faces different problems arising from the multiple versions that now emerge on the definition of design itself (Buchanan and Margolin, 1995). Today we can see how society is presented with visions of design that do not always correspond with the spirit and ideals of the discipline. Even advertising presents a different concept of design than the one recognized by professional bodies or universities.

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The importance of these perspectives has not received the necessary attention. It is sufficient to note, for example, that if, from a historical point of view, we consider that design is an artistic activity or emphasize its relationship with technical and production developments, then the education of design students, their professional performance and its impact on society will be guided and measured by these visions.

Today we know that we have become a society designed and designerly in the sense that the products of designer's activity are an important influence that shapes our behaviour and how we relate to other human beings and the environment.

Two traditions: Europe and the United States

One of the most influential works in the field of design history is that of Nikolaus Pevsner, who, in 1936, published *Pioneers of Modern Design*. This work is part of a tradition that has its roots in the study of architecture from the perspective of art history (Pevsner, 2011).

Pevsner was a prominent art historian and through *Pioneers of Modern Design* he contributed with methodologies peculiar to art. Therefore he focused his efforts on the individual's development and works that are considered as good examples of professional practice. To date this approach permeates much of society's idea about design: focused on objects and their stylistic features that largely glorify the designer as the hero of modernity:

It is the creative energy of this world in which we live and work that we seek to dominate, a world of science and technology, speed and danger, of hard struggles and no personal security and that is glorified in the architecture of Gropius and while this continues to be the world and its ambitions and problems, the style of Gropius and other pioneers will be valid (Pevsner, 2011, p. 217).

On the other hand, the work of Read (1967, 1970) places design as heir of Fine Arts, and moves away from architecture. This perspective has nurtured especially graphic design, however the same orientation can be observed in both authors in the sense that design history focuses on objects and individual creators. Although both support the notion that modern design is more an idea than a style, we cannot fail to note that in reality these histories have as an intrinsic substrate the notion of style. Even the much-valued functionality of objects is solved in a style (Adorno, 2008).

For both authors, the problem of industrial design is to find an adequate expression to the changes imposed by industrial production:

The real problem is not the adaptation of the aesthetic standards of craftsmanship to machine production, but the creation of new aesthetic standards for new production methods (Read, 1967, p. 9).

Coupled with the positions of Pevsner and Read, we find another stream, also within this tradition, which emerged from the study of the decorative arts.

Decorative arts are a fertile context amongst museum collections or objects that are gathered under the general

rubric of "antiques", in both fields (architecture and decorative arts) there's a perspective of design history centred on objects and their individual creators, detached from concerns beyond aesthetics and style.

Another important work is the one of Banham (1960), who puts design in the context of technological development and focuses on the analysis of theories rather than objects, but even theories, in Banham's work, are analysed from the perspective of art history. Another important aspect of his work is that to some extent it reduces the importance of the individual designer, since objects are placed within the framework of a theory, making it possible to study the work of designers within a broader context.

In contrast to the European tradition, another perspective was generated by Giedion (1978), who highlights the value of innovation related to the use of objects, mechanisms and mass production processes. It is also important to note that the objects that he analyses are not necessarily related to decoration or home use, but covers capital goods (such as agricultural harvesters) and machinery (such as sewing and washing machines and vacuum cleaners).

The hero in the tradition of the USA is the inventor that continues the design process up to aspects related to consumption, therefore creating enterprises as in the case of Bell, Ford or Singer (Rodríguez, 2011).

A very comprehensive work, about the tradition of the USA is developed in two volumes by Arthur Pulos, who analyses design in the historical context of the USA, from colonial times to the mid-twentieth century (Pulos, 1983). In this work, the individual designer is closely related to the entrepreneur and to the innovations that had an impact on various production areas and home products.

In his second book (Pulos, 1988), the first individual designers emerge and thus appears design profession as a service to the industry to increase the value of objects. Here we can identify two streams: one that increases functional value, linked to the ergonomic improvement of objects, as in the work of Dreyfuss (1955). Another case is that of Geddes (1940), who had a great influence on the design of commercial premises and exhibitions. In Geddes's work, we can observe the transition from functional design to styling, which is the second stream that can be identified and which finds its most well known figure in Loewy (1988).

We cannot fail to mention other authors like de Fusco (1995), which follows the European tradition and is important for graphic design. His work abounds with themes such as Italian design, which the central version led by Pevsner has left out.

It is important to note that most of the above studies focus on industrial design. Even Pevsner's line, which departs with the Arts and Crafts movement in the nineteenth century and continues in Germany with the Deutscher Werkbund and the Bauhaus, gives just some references to the development of graphic design. For the field of graphic design, the works of Satué (1988) and Meggs (1998) are of great importance, for their amplitude and because they establish as the source of graphic design, prehistoric cave paintings or the beginning of cuneiform writing.

Other perspectives

Forty (1986) offers a fresh look and establishes a clear distance from the stream initiated by Pevsner, proposing a design history that revolves around technological processes (such as electrification) and social needs (including hygiene) and their impact on different areas, such as home, business or office. Forty's work is of great importance, because it breaks the bonds of design history with art history emphasising other factors. With this approach, design history opens itself to other possible interpretations and narratives.

[...] It has been obscured the fact that design came at a particular stage in the history of capitalism and that it has played a vital role in the creation of industrial wealth. Limit it to a purely artistic activity has made it seem trivial and its contribution has been relegated to a mere cultural appendage (Forty, 1986, p. 6).

Therefore Forty seeks to explain design not as the centre or generator, but as the result of a confluence of factors, such as economy, technology and consumption, which, in turn, seek to serve needs that exist in society.

It is relevant to note that, in the last chapter of his book, Forty seeks to diminish the myth of the individual creator, which, in his opinion, has been harmful, especially for design schools, where students consider the myth of the "omnipotent" personality as the engine of creativity and design and they seek to reproduce this image, forgetting that design is limited by a number of contextual factors.

Similarly, the work of Sparke (1987) studies the context in which various national styles of design emerge, with a focus on market mechanisms and the available resources to optimize production. It is in these factors where Sparke sees the difference, for example, between products developed in Japan or Germany, countries that have sought, in the absence of a significant surplus of natural resources, innovation and high efficiency on mechanical or electronic products, while Scandinavian countries have created a design style based on their traditions and high quality manufacture. For this author, design results from the need to build a competitive advantage in the consumer market and from the ability of technology to empower products.

Design is a complex concept. It is both a process and the result of that process: form, style and meaning of the artefacts that have been 'designed'. There are many factors that influence this process: the designer's ideas (if there is one involved), technological determinants in the manufacture of the product, socio-economic constraints of the manufacturing process and use of the final product, the cultural context that gave rise to the initial need of the object and the conditions of manufacture. The political situation in the manufacturing country can influence the way in which it occurs and its final appearance (Sparke, 1987, p. 8).

This wave of new attitudes to design history is highlighted in the work of Heskett (1988), who argues that

consumption is a determining factor in design and that the issue of style, as understood by art history is irrelevant because we are actually located within the social manipulation of symbols and signs that significantly influence the consumption of various products. It is in these moments when the question on what is the object of study of design history arises.

The situation becomes more complex when other studies about objects enter the arena, such as Baudrillard's (2004, 2002), who does it from the social and semiotic perspective.

[...] It is not about objects defined by its function, or about how we could subdivide them to facilitate analysis, but the processes by which people come into relationship with them and the systematic behaviors and human relations resulting therefrom (Baudrillard, 2004, p. 2).

From here on, design history faces the problem of interdiscipline and its field of study expands from objects and designer's professional activity to complex economic, political and cultural relations. Therefore our interest is not just the form, but also how manufacturing and technological processes result on consumption and the use that some countries make of design, either to strengthen cultural identities or to promote the opening of global markets.

On the other hand, countries like the ones in Latin America arrived late to the industrial development and find themselves at a crossroad, as design, not infrequently, is understood as a sign of modernity and progress, but this idea involves the adoption of concepts which have been generated in the central countries, and this may not be consistent with either the state of development of the industry or with other issues.

For instance, for many peripheral countries, craft is not just an artistic or cultural activity, but it is a way to produce everyday objects that reflect a productive mode and a certain way to use objects, as well as a powerful mean of cultural identification. By acting in the field of crafts, it is clear that the designer formed under the precepts of modern design is not sufficiently or suitably prepared to deal with such a complex problem. Therefore in many cases the result are projects that fail to meet the aspirations of artisans, manufacturers or users and also can break or distort the complex ties that form the social tissue of artisan communities.

These are some of the reasons for the unfortunate results of historical analysis about the relationship between design and crafts in peripheral countries. Of course, the models generated in the European and USA traditions are inappropriate for this context.

Stories of History

Walker (1990) is one of the first authors to study the issue of design historiography. For him, the main problem the historian faces is the lack of a clear and agreed definition of what is design, making it necessary to take a starting point to establish the limits of design history as a field of study. The central proposal of his work is the need to open design history to multiple interdisciplinary relationships, taking into account sociological and economical

issues, including aspects such as domestic consumption, lifestyles and diversity of tastes that traditional studies have denied.

Meanwhile, Fallan (2010) makes a strong critique of traditional views of design history, since he considers that they focus on aesthetic considerations, the cult of personality of individuals and also because they select as an example of study items that are valuable or unusual (in terms of mass consumption) and the emphasis is usually placed on schools whose line starts at the Bauhaus.

Thus, for this author, the art history, with its traditions and methods, is not enough to address the analysis of the relationship between society, technology and design, and proposes that design history must adopt broader views. He discloses his position in a recent book (Fallan, 2013) on Scandinavian design where case studies are carried out covering examples from photography, transportation, interior, furniture and corporate identity, which in turn are analysed from several points of view, such as legislation, production systems, marketing and consumption. Fallan's work has defeated the idea of Scandinavian design as model of a democratic and functional approach.

The straitjacket of mythologies woven carefully around Nordic design by marketers, promoters and historians has resulted in a strong image, but distorted of what Scandinavian design really is. Especially the popular and international perception of this smartly manufactured concept, has led to an understanding disturbingly shrunken (Fallan, 2013, p. 2).

By destroying the traditional myth of Scandinavian design a different vision emerges, that, while it is less romantic than the one traditionally held, is much more powerful by emphasizing business competitiveness, cultural identity, the concept of branding applied to certain types of objects, many of them focused on an export market rather than for local consumption.

Certainly, there are many more authors who analyse the historiography of design. In this regard, we can briefly mention the debate held by Margolin and Forty, because it exemplifies the problems faced by design history.

In 1991, Margolin gave a lecture entitled *Design History or Design Studies* (2005), where he raised the impossibility of defining design history as a field of study.

Since we can not isolate fixed sets of a kind of products, whether tangible or intangible, as the subject of study of design history and instead we need to think about this practice as an act of permanent invention, it is unrealistic to believe that we can demarcate a stable field of study as an asset of design historians (Margolin, 2005, p. 319).

Given this impossibility, he proposes the emergence of a new field, called Design Studies:

Design studies are a research field that addresses how to make and use products in our daily lives and how we've done in the past. [...]

Design studies address issues concerning the design and planning, production, shape, distribution and use of products and consider these issues in the present and in

the past. Along with products, design studies also have a particular relationship to the network of discourses in which production and use are inserted; their study includes visual culture and art, as well as the design of products and systems (Margolin, 2005, p. 321).

Margolin ties history to theory, the past with prospective and thus marks a direction to dematerialization by getting away from objects as a guiding thread, and moves towards issues such as consumption, planning and material culture.

Given this proposal, Forty wrote a response (Forty, 1993) arguing that expanding design analysis as proposed by Margolin puts aside the aspect of quality or "good design", a concept that in Forty's conception is central to the study and practice of design. Forty emphasizes that Margolin's stance does not acknowledge changes in the field of art history, such as sociology of art, so actually we do not need a new field of study, but we are in need of good design history.

Margolin's (1995) response insisted that there is not a definite core that identifies design history by focusing on objects, since these are always changing and their classification is a limitation. This debate originated different positions among art historians, which was expanded to other authors in the journal *Design Issues* (1995, vol. 11, no. 1).

The debate is not over yet. Currently voices that argue either in one direction or another are heard. One is that of Julier (2010), who departs from a sharp critique of the state of design history, in order to open its outlook to include concepts of marginality (as is the feminist design) and design in the periphery (political, cultural and economic).

This complex and undefined landscape receives a further impact from another factor of great importance: the dissemination in various media, not only of design – in its multiple meanings and handling by advertising –, but also by making popular those objects considered as "good design". When it opens to other audiences, the picture of design history is further complicated.

The audiences of History

While most of the works mentioned so far have had as an audience design students, professionals, and academic researchers (from within the field of design and other academic fields), we have recently witnessed the emergence of many books on design history or historical objects displaying examples of a concept of good design (Fiell and Fiell, 2012) that is usually linked to the concept generated on the industrialized nations and closely related to the Modern Movement.

Many of these books have no analysis of objects, but have plenty of illustrations of good quality and a bibliographic record about the authors of the various products. These books fulfil the task of disseminating to a large public, works that are good examples of the mainstream of design (alias based on the aesthetics of the products and a "functionalist" approach). Other books of this nature focus on schools or styles (again the Bauhaus or Art Nouveau) so that some basic notions and concepts are also publicized.

The collection of books published by the Design Museum in London deserves special mention, for in which we find a careful selection of objects according to a certain category with the generic title of *Fifty [...] that changed the world* (Design Museum, 2009). In each of these books there is a fundamental analysis containing data regarding the context in which the selected objects are designed and argues about its relevance. In this collection, we can see the driving hand of Sudjic, director of the Design Museum, who is responsible for opening the doors of design and its intricate relationships to a greater audience (Sudjic, 2009). On the other hand, perhaps we should understand that these texts are addressed to the wide dissemination of the achievements of professional practice. In this sense, it is also notable the work of Conran (2005), who has published several books that address various aspects of design, from the use of objects indoors (closely related to home decoration) to interviews with renowned designers.

For some historians, these books are “not serious”, yet there is no doubt about their contribution to a culture of design.

Some possibilities

To analyse some of the possible approaches for design histories in Latin America, we cannot pull out ourselves from the global context, so the review presented in the previous pages is important because it offers a large framework. On the other hand, it is necessary to adopt a systemic perspective in order to observe the phenomenon of design in its multiple relationships.

As a starting point, we can think of a system with two major elements. The first one can be considered as a gravitational centre of history. It consists of the following elements: Design Processes; Production Processes; Objects (understood as the result of the processes of design and

production); and the Impact that this elements have on culture, economy and society as a whole.

Figure 1 shows the flow of relationships between these elements: the processes of design and production give rise to objects and they, in turn, have an impact on the economy, culture and society in general, which (ideally) finds its needs or desires satisfied.

The second element of the system refers to the orientation or focus of historical analysis based on audiences. Broadly speaking, we can mention the following:

- Students and professionals: are those that practice or study the phenomenon of design (not just designers, but also sociologists, anthropologist, communication, marketing, advertising, etc. are included).
- Entrepreneurs: they want to know about the potential contributions or success cases where design has contributed to business development.
- Public officials: today there is much talk about the need of strong and sensible policies that reinforce the relation of design to innovation and general development, be it economical, sociological or cultural, therefore a historical perspective is important for formulating these policies and guide the actions that should follow.
- General public: those who wish to expand their knowledge on material culture, its conformation and roots.

Figure 2 shows the flow of relationships between potential audiences: students and professionals have a great influence on the general public, which, in turn, influences public policy decisions and entrepreneurs who seek to relate to and understand the needs and desires of citizens and consumers.

Both elements of the system are strongly interrelated and it is at this interface between the two where we can

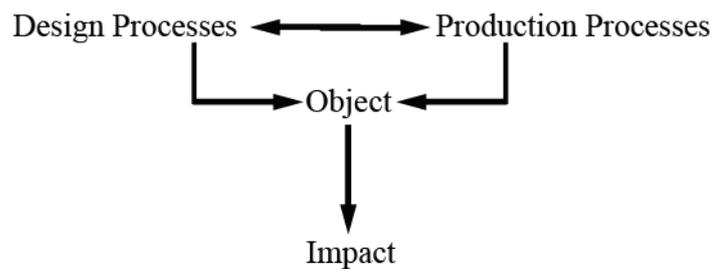


Figure 1. Flow of relationship between processes, object and impact.

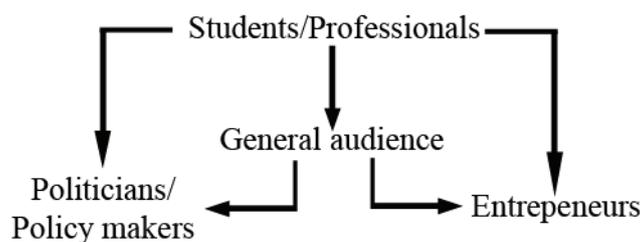


Figure 2. Flow of relationship between audiences.

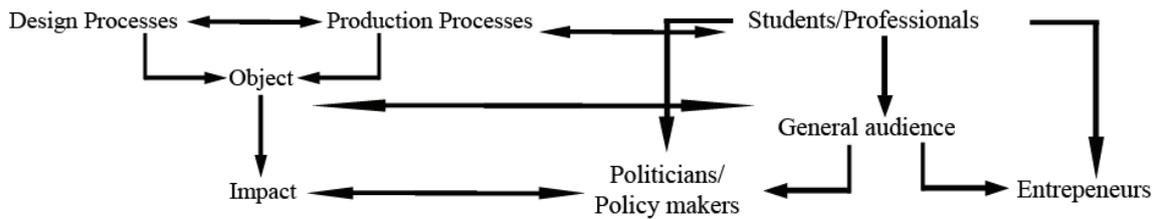


Figure 3. Possible relationships.

find some guides or possible approaches for the development of different design histories.

Figure 3 shows some possible relationships between both parts of the system.

From this stance, it can be argued that the various histories of design cannot be studied without taking into account the different audiences, since they are the ones that actually impose requirements, such as the main aspects to be analysed or the perspective for such analysis. For example, those features that have to do with design processes or technical-productive development will find a receptive audience among students and professionals from different areas who wish to understand the phenomenon of design and its relationship with technology.

Secondly, we have those histories centred on objects that could provide guidance to the general public on their use or applicability in different contexts. Quite possibly these narratives will have a lot of images to enhance the development of a culture of design.

Finally, we mention those histories that seek to provide information and knowledge about the use of design (in terms of discipline) in competitive contexts, so that employers and employees working on public policy can understand the results of the design processes to increase value, competitiveness and positioning of products and brands in global and local discourses. It is perhaps in this area where design history in the peripheral countries has an important role to play. We know more about the success of companies like Apple, Alessi or Braun than we do about local enterprises. The central question for this approach to design history is: what is the usefulness of design in peripheral countries? We could find an almost virgin field of study in trying to obtain some of the many possible answers to this question.

This approach necessarily involves an interdisciplinary posture in which economy, anthropology, sociology and design meet. This is a big challenge for historians, because to some extent (as in any interdisciplinary work) it means leaving behind some of the methods and theories that are usually taken for granted and seek, under other modes of analysis, new routes to empower the development of these works, more suited to our context, needs and challenges.

Finally, it should be mentioned that in Latin America several texts have been written that seek to expose the development of design in the region and it seems that their number is increasing. These texts include those written by Fernandez and Bonsiepe (2008) as well as Maseda (2006) and Comisarenco (2006), to name just a few. To analyse the material produced by Latin Americans it is deserved a text

specifically focused on the historiographical production in the region. The present work has sought to point out those documents that, because of their wide distribution, have had a greater impact, both in teaching, research and professional practice. This situation by itself should lead us to reflect on aspects of dependency.

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